"ARCHITECTURAL EMBELLISHMENTS": SPACE FORMS IN THE ASSIGNATION AND THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

Adela Livia Catană
Assist. Prof. PhD., Military Technical Academy

Abstract: This article is based on two well-known short stories written by American author Edgar Allan Poe– The Assignation (1834) and The Fall of the House of Usher (1839)– and aims to offer a close analysis of the relation character/observer and chamber/ house.

Keywords: death,dream, reverie, space, symbols

Edgar Allan Poe was deeply influenced by the Gothic fiction in creating his complex narrative spaces which combine real and fantastic elements in order to trigger an overwhelming atmosphere. The American writer succeed in revealing an unusual mutual relation between the material surroundings and the inner torments of his characters, rendering space as a reflection but also as a source of psychological conflicts. Poe's horror invested space can be seen as an entity in its own right, which embodies symbolic value. His tragic heroes are madmen whose obsession with death turns their existence rather impossible in the actual material world. Positioned in a room, house or other enclosure, these introverted characters are rarely ever brought outside. When this happens, however, nature does its best to repress, confine and enclose the characters. In general, the separation from everything that is part of the outside world enables characters to transcend time and space and reach a specific stage of existence- the reverie and the dream. In this sense, the protagonist in Poe's *The Assignation* confesses: "To dream . . . has been the business of my life. I have therefore framed for myself, as you see, a bower of dreams. In the heart of Venice could I have erected a better? You behold around you, it is true, a medley of architectural embellishments." (Poe, *TA* 147). The mental state of the character produces the setting and atmosphere, which usually result in the manifestation of everything that is feared. The character manipulates his environment and uses tangible buildings and their contents as talismans to outwit death. The object of its fear is not death itself, but the experience of dying. Tragically, despite all the efforts of the character death comes anyway.

In the course of time, critics came up with various interpretations regarding the space imagined by Poe in his short-stories. J.R. Lowell, for instance, stated that, Poe had chosen to "exhibit his power chiefly in a dim region which stretches from the very utmost limits of the probable into the weird confines of superstition and unreality" (qtd. in Carlson 13). In order to achieve this, he combined two faculties which are seldom found united: a "power of influencing the mind of the reader by the impalpable shadows of mystery", and a "minuteness of detail which does not leave a pin or a button unnoticed" (13). His idea was later developed by Philip Pendleton Cooke, who said that Poe liked to adventure into a world "Out of space, out of time," wholly leaving "beneath and behind him the wide and happy realm of the common cheerful life" (qtd. in Carlson 26). There, his narrator "dealt in mysteries of life in death," dissected monomanies and exhibited "convulsions of the soul" (26). On the other hand, Baudelaire assumed that Poe's protagonist finds refugee in dreams, as he wants to escape from the minds of a "greedy world, hungry for material things" (26). The day Poe wrote "All certainty is in dreams," he became again the true poet, Philip Pendleton Cooke

BDD-A27465 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:33 UTC)

said, "doubtless obeying the ineluctable truth which haunts us like a demon, he uttered the ardent sighs of the fallen angel who remembers heaven; he lamented the old age and the lost Eden; he wept over all the magnificence of nature shrivelling up before the hot breath of fiery furnaces..." (qtd. in Carlson 47). Poe's narrative texts overlap various supernatural elements whose only purpose may seem to be the evocation of horror. Discerning readers, however, have concluded that such phantasmagoria is a clear evidence of Poe's "pre-adolescent mentality" and stressed — to recall here T. S. Eliot's statement—that his "otherworldly tales amount to little more than gimcrackery" (qtd. in Carlson 212). Even those with a scholarly regard for Poe's achievement sometimes assume (as the author invited us to) that the mystical elements in his fiction serve mainly to secure a necessary "single effect" (212). Moreover, collectively examined, his tales reveal the complex function of the supernatural- that of pushing the character to overcome or surrender to his tragic destiny- death. The intrusion of the uncanny generates becomes, in Lovecraft's view, a "cosmic panic" and poses "the troubling paradox at the center of Poe's dark vision" (qtd. in Harris 111).

As a true Romantic poet, Poe identified imagination with dream, but unlike many other writers of his time, he observed the phenomena of dream with clinical precision, carefully distinguishing the various states through which the mind passes on its way to sleep. Poe's character has to pass from wakefulness to reverie, from reverie to a hypnologic state and from the hypnologic state to a deep dream. During this process, his "half-closed eye" can retain an infinite procession of dynamical forms that are in a permanent change. His special look melts the material structures of reality and makes him perceive beyond the forms of the objects that he sees. Immersed in a dream, the character is no longer a reliable one (Wilbur 258). *TheAssignation* (1834) or *TheVisionary* (as it was also entitled) and *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839) can function as clear examples of this idea.

The protagonist-narrator in *The Assignation* begins his story by confessing to have poor memories and to be confused: "It is with a confused recollection that I bring to mind the circumstances of that meeting. Yet I remember—aah! how should I forget?— the deep midnight, the Bridge of Sighs, the beauty of woman, and the Genius of Romance that stalked up and down the narrow canal" (Poe 139). This statement can be regarded, in fact, as a disclaimer; the character denying the responsibility for the events he intends to share, or a deliberate highlight of the fact that the story itself is just a plastering of a confused mind, a fabulation. This phenomenon can be explained through the principle of condensation summarized by Freud in this formula: "each element in the content of a dream is "overdetermined" by material in the dream-thoughts; it is not derived from a single element in the dream-thoughts, but may be traced back to a whole number" (qtd. in Bloom 91). In other words, the narrator in *The Assignation*, (just like the one in *Fall of the House of Usher* and almost all of Poe's characters) is awestruck by numerous images which he continues to analyse in great detail. His disturbed mind renders him, however, unable to differentiate between reality and memory/imagination/dream: "Who does not remember that, at such a time as this, the eye, like a shattered mirror, multiplies the images of its sorrow, and sees in innumerable far-off places, the wo which is close at hand?" (Poe, *TA* 140). Imagination is not rejected at all. On the contrary; it is embraced and cultivated by the narrator who feels that there is no fault in it and moreover, no one to blame for it:

There are surely other worlds than this —other thoughts than the thoughts of the multitude —other speculations than the speculations of the sophist. Who then shall call thy conduct into question? who blame thee for thy visionary hours, or denounce those occupations as a wasting away of life, which were but the overflowings of thine everlasting energies? (139)

The narrator meets a man of great imagination who happens to be now dead and the scene takes place on "one night of unusual gloom" after "the great clock of the Piazza had

BDD-A27465 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:33 UTC)

sounded the fifth hour of the Italian evening" (139). The square of the Campanile is quiet and the lights in the doge's palace are going out. As the narrator arrives to the square in a gondola via the Grand Canal, the silence is broken by "one hysterical and long continued shriek" (139). This horrifying sound does not only produce a special disturbance but also a mental one, as from this point on the narrator losses his inner balance- "Startled at the sound, I sprang upon my feet" (139). The gondolier lets his single oar slip away "in the pitchy darkness beyond a chance of recovery" and from this moment on, the narrator finds himself left at the guidance of the current, just as if he were hopelessly lost to the power of thoughts/ dreams or virtually passing the point of no return. One might easily say that the gondolier is actually Charon or Kharon, the ferryman of Hades, who carries the souls of the newly deceased across the Styx river to world of the dead. The idea that the narrator reaches actually the 'Inferno' is further sustained by the sight of "a thousand flambeaux" that "turned all at once that deep gloom into a livid and preternatural day" and by the fact that he (just like Dante from the *Divina Comedie*) will witness some of the most condemnable sins: laziness, avarice, adultery, crime and suicide (140). A uniquely beautiful woman, Marchesa Aphrodite, trapped in an unhappy marriage, tries to drown her only child, thinking that this way, she will be taken to prison and hopefully executed. Meanwhile, her husband, old Mentoni, is trapped in his world of richness and decadence, and totally unable to realise the gravity of the event. A young man rescues the child and Marchesa's self-destruction falls apart. The baby is saved, but "another's arms" take him away, as if he would be lost for ever or dead (141). The mysterious rescuer turns out to be the lover whom she deserted (back in England), in order to marry a man she did not love, but who could offer her a title and wealth. The narrator overhears Marchesa telling the rescuer, that "thou hast conquered—one hour after sunrise—we shall meet—so let it be" (141). The statement puzzles the narrator. By his act she must go with his plan, and accept the "assignation" that he arranged in his apartments. There they will unite themselves in a tragic marriage – a double suicide. Their only escape lies in a dream beyond this world; one that derives from their unrequited love.

It is extremely interesting that the narrator recognizes the young man from previous encounters and offers him a ride home in his gondola; it is as if the two unite their destinies. The young man, who is actually an alter ego of Poe, chooses to estrange himself from the so-called "real world" hiding in his astonishing Palazzo, which "towers above the waters of the Grand Canal in the vicinity of the Rialto" (Poe, *TA* 141). In fact, all Poe's heroes are invariably enclosed or circumscribed. They exclude themselves from the consciousness of the so-called real world, the world of time and reason and physical facts. Although they are placed in secluded and richly-furnished rooms of remote and mouldering mansions, they are in the process of dreaming their way out. When the narrator sees the Palazzo, he is struck by the abounding extravagance of the surroundings which are beyond what he had ever expected. The fact that he mentions the time of his arrival, "shortly after sunrise," indicates the fact that he is still aware of his temporal existence but, in order to approach the master's private chamber, he must climb a "broad winding staircase of mosaics" (141). Poe uses this image as a symbol of the obscure and wandering movement of the mind. The stairs and the passages that the character walks through render him confused as to place and direction. Confusion becomes, therefore, a first step towards reverie. When the character reaches this state he begins to lose any sense of locality and time so he achieves an infinite freedom regarding space (Wilbur 268).

The master's chamber has a dazzling, astonishing and original architecture. It is a difficult space to measure because of the wall-to-wall carpeting: "Rich draperies in every part of the room trembled to the vibration of low, melancholy music, whose origin was not to be discovered" (Poe, *TA* 143). This fluid shifting of figure, definitely suggests the symptoms of the hypnagogic state. It increases the architectural ambiguity, creating "a sensation of

BDD-A27465 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:33 UTC)

uncertainty and of a dream floating" (qtd. in Wilbur 270). Here, the character finds himself out of Space and out of Time and the apartments he inhabits are "bowers of dreams" (270). In a chapter on decorative art, Paul Souriau states that in the very principal of decoration with figures, there is "something irrational and like a slight fissure, that is decidedly very characteristic of this art" (22-23). Certainly, decorative art "is not the product of pure reason" (22); it is an art which "gives free rein to fantasy and caprice..." (94). The trembling image triggers the great loss of consciousness; a "vertige which is nearly fatal", Souriou says (94). He recognises that ornament can create anxiety and obsession but invites the reader to fantasize on ornamental decor, as "true hallucinations transform the very principles of vision" (77). When the narrator enters the apartment feels "blind and dizzy with luxuriousness," and confesses: "I could not bring myself to believe that the wealth of any subject in Europe could have supplied the princely magnificence which burned and blazed around" (Poe, *TA* 142). The room is overwhelming due to its Greek paintings, Italian sculptures, Egyptian carvings, luxurious draperies, tinted panes of glass, and carpets embellished with Chile gold. All these pieces of furniture act as the material manifestation of the decorator's mental furniture and their eclectic combination reflects the soul's visionary transcendence of spatial and temporal limitations. In Gaston Bachelard's view, "to attain this constancy of the dream, we must hold before our eyes more than real images. We must trace these images born in us and living in our dreams, these images charged with that rich oneiric matter which provides inexhaustible substance for the material imagination" (1994: 20).

Poe's chamber of dream is autonomous in every other respect. The narrator confesses that "although, the sun had arisen, the room was still brilliantly lighted up" (Bachelard 1994: 20). Surprisingly, this light doesn't come from a usual source; it is the light of a dreaming soul, a spiritual light, which unlike the sun, is of divine nature. Although no breath of air enters from the outside world, the draperies are stirred by magical and intramural air currents. Likewise, the music that can be heard inside the room has no earthly origins. The sense of smell is "oppressed by mingled and conflicting perfumes, reeking up from strange convolute censers" (Poe, *TA* 143). In other words, space becomes an entity in its own right, whose existence can be acknowledged only at a superior level of spiritual evolution, far from the material reality. Only inside it the dreaming psyche can separate itself wholly from the bodily senses- the "rudimental senses," as Poe called them. These are dependent on objective stimuli- on the lights, sounds and smells of the physical world. But the sensuous life of dream is self-sufficient and immaterial, and consists in the imagination's Godlike enjoyment of its own creations (Wilbur 274). The protagonist of "The Assignation" needs to acquire a new kind of subjectivity: "Once I was myself a decorist; but sublimation of folly has palled upon my soul.... Like these arabesque censers, my spirit is writhing in fire, and the delirium of this scene is fashioning me for wilder visions of that land of real dreams whither I am now rapidly departing" (Poe, *TA* 147). The decorator may have given up the folly of decor, but he indicates that the arabesque is to the decorist what the sublime is to the romanticist- "a transcendental conduit" (Berman 129). The delirious decor helps the character to experience "wilder visions of that land of real dreams" (129). The physical isolation of the character reflects the triumph of irrational. Only by being imprisoned, the character can become the victim of imagination and dream, of delirium and madness. According to Richard Wilbur, there are three notions about Poe's typical building. First of all, it is set apart in a valley or a sea or a waste palace, and this remoteness is intended to express the retreat of the poet's mind from the worldly consciousness into a dream. Secondly, the building is a tottery structure, and this indicates that the dreamer within is in that unstable threshold condition called hypnagogic state. Finally, it is crumbling or decomposing, suggesting that the dreamer's mind is moving toward a perfect freedom from his material self and the material world (Wilbur 267). On the other hand, Bachelard's idea that Poe's narrative buildings may evoke a maternal figure is not

BDD-A27465 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:33 UTC)

to be ignored either. An inhabited space has a notion of "home", Bachelard says, when a human being finds shelter comfort and protection in it (1969: 30). Moreover, the HOUSE becomes a maternal figure in which we store out treasures from previous years and which equally invest with certain feelings:

it is not a question of describing houses, or enumerating their picturesque features and analyzing for which reasons they are comfortable. On the contrary, we must go beyond the problems of description -whether this description be objective or subjective, that is, whether it give facts or impressions--in order to attain to the primary virtues, those that reveal an attachment that is native in some way to the primary function of inhabiting". (Bachelard 1969: 30).

In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Roderick and Lady Madeline live in a mansion that they have not left for years. This manor house is islanded in a bog, which is surrounded by the family domain above which "clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens" (Poe, *TFHU* 177). This circumscribed space can be resembles, in a Bachelardian perspective, to a shell (1969: 27). According to the French epistemologist, shells are constructed by some kid of transcendental geometry, which stands out from the disorder of most perceptible things. The dreamer retreats himself into its own private corner, which limits its mobility but also offers him provides shelter and an area for meditation. Moreover, the private corner is a prolific place where symbolic analogies can reinforce each another in "a steely web of causes and effects" (Bachelard 1969: 27). In the same line of ideas, the House of Usher becomes "a real cosmos in every sense of the word" that seems to defend Roderick and his sister in depth (1969: 28). Inside this space, they seal themselves, giving up friends, ideas and progress. Just like the place they live in, the two characters become musty and mildewed, and sick unto their souls as a consequence of the lack of contact with the outside world. When the house itself is swallowed up by the waters of the tarn, the characters die with it, their disappearance becoming a sign of their inaccessible nature.

Typically for Gothic texts, this short-story, too, opens with the description of a solitary rider passing through "a singularly dreary tract of country" (Poe, *TFHU* 177). The man is oppressed by "a sense of insufferable loom", when, as evening draws on, he approaches the remote, dilapidated, and melancholic House of Usher (177). The climax of the scene occurs when the rider takes his horse at the brink of "a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling," and experiences "a shudder more thrilling than before" as he sees in the silent black waters "inverted images of the grey sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems a, and the vacant and eye-like windows" (178). At this stage, the new comer has a dual experience the house, as reality is contaminated by the "dream of the reveller upon opium" (177). Apparently, Poe's characters are either alcohol or drug addicts and as Bachelard states, the daydream deepens to the point where an immemorial domain opens up for the dreamer of a home beyond man's earliest memory (1969: 28). The return to the House of Usher, which is in Bachelar's terms an Immemorial place, overwhelms the protagonist with old memories and triggers his travel back in time, to the land of "Motionless Childhood" (1969: 28). The reader is informed by the visitor that the house of his childhood friends was totally different from the one he finds in front of his eyes; perhaps beautiful and welcoming. However, now, things have deeply changed although the visitor is not very conscious of this fact:

There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart --an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it --I paused to think --what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered. I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations

BDD-A27465 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:33 UTC)

beyond our depth. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression. (Poe, *TFHU* 177)

Bachelard believes that the poetic image emerges into our consciousness as a direct product of the heart, soul and being of a man. He believes that the image comes before thought and therefore he looks not at the phenomenology of the mind but that of the soul (1969: 28). This idea can very well explain the connection narrator/observer and the mood-invested space. The visitor does not experience this place at the conscious level but at the emotional one. "The Haunted Palace" is seen to be a possible key to the general meaning of Poe's architecture. The poem is recited by Roderick and accompanied with wild guitar improvisations, becoming a symbol of Roderick Usher, himself. Poe said about it that: "I mean to imply a mind haunted by phantoms — a disordered brain" (Wilbur 263). Poe uses a representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning through concrete and material forms to provide the image of a man's head when literally he is describing a palace. Each stanza describes a different part of a once sane soul that has rotten, hence the mad laughter at the end of the poem: *In the greenest of our valleys,/ By good angels tenanted,/ Once fair and stately palace --/ Radiant palace --reared its head./ In the monarch Thought's dominion --/ It stood there!/ Never seraph spread a pinion/ Over fabric half so fair*. (Poe, *TFHU* 183).

The "Radiant palace" that stands at the centre of the "greenest of our valleys" represents the man's mind. Guarded by "good angels" his mind is "the circumscribed Eden of dreams" (183). "The monarch Thought's dominion," is a symbol of the man's exclusive awareness of exalted and spiritual elements (183). The two "luminous windows" of the palace resemble to the man's eyes; two mirrors to his soul (183). The "pearl and ruby" door represents the man's mouth with red lips and pearl pearly white teeth; the place where the mind and soul materialise taking the shape of words (183). "Porphyrogene" makes reference to royalty/perfection of a mind in control of its thought, the consciousness sitting on its throne. The beautiful Echoes which issue from the pearl and ruby door are the poetic utterances of the man's harmonious imagination, here symbolized as an orderly dance. The last two stanzas of the poem describe the physical and spiritual corruption of the palace and its domain. Illness and death take the form of a civil war and disrupt the domain of the monarch Thought. Poe's use of this figurative treatment illustrates the coming of death and the reaction of the frail human beings: *But evil things, in robes of sorrow,/ Assailed the monarch's high estate;/ (Ah, let us mourn, for never morrow/ Shall dawn upon him, desolate!)/ And, round about his home, the glory/ That blushed and bloomed/ Is but a dim-remembered story/ Of the old time entombed* (Poe, *TFHU* 183). For most of our lives, we are sane people that are free of thoughts of death until we start to reach an age in which death becomes the key element that drives us nearly to insanity: *And travellers now within that valley,/ Through the red-litten windows, see/ Vast forms that move fantastically/ To a discordant melody;/ While, like a rapid ghastly river,/ Through the pale door,/ A hideous throng rush out forever,/ And laugh --but smile no more* (184).

The evil spirits in the palace are, metaphorically, thoughts of the inevitable demise. The valley becomes barren, like the domain of Roderick Usher; the eye-like windows of the palace are no longer "luminous," but have become "red-litten" like the bloodshot eyes of a drunkard or a madman (184). Its mouth is now "pale" rather than "pearl and ruby," and through it come no sweet Echoes, as before, but the wild laughter of a ravished mind (184). The echo of laughter and the absence of smile, which are stressed by the end of the poem, reveal the approach of an insane death.

In "The Haunted Palace," the monarch Thought transcends, just like Roderick Usher, from one state of mind to another one. Although at an initial stage, in his early childhood, he experiences an imaginative harmony, in his adult life, its consciousness is more and more

BDD-A27465 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:33 UTC)

invaded by the corrupt and corrupting external world. In other words, he succumbs to passion and irrationality. This is the main reason for which the character has to experience a mental torment. Struggling between imagination and the intellect or the moral sense, the character is no longer able to create a serene image of the world. It strives to annihilate the outer world by turning in upon itself. Although imagination is usually considered to be the faculty of forming images, Bachelard showed that it is also capable of "deforming the images offered by perception, of freeing ourselves from the immediate images; it is especially the faculty of changing images" (1994: 19). In other words imagination plunges the character into irrationality and dream; and all its dreams are efforts both to recall and to simulate its primal, unfallen state.

The relation between the house-man symbol and the tarn is made obvious by a crack in the structure of the mansion. This crack announces the imminent collapse of Roderick Usher's ruined personality: "Perhaps the eye of a scrutinising observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn" (Poe, *TFHU* 184). The House of Usher, which is in a state of extreme decay, and the stagnant tarn exert an extraordinary influence on Roderic's life and the lives of his ancestors. The stonework of its facade is so decomposed that it reminds the narrator "of the specious totality of old woodwork which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault" (184). The Usher mansion is so extremely dilapidate and gives the impression that it will collapse at any moment. It remains, however, standing only because the atmosphere of Usher's domain is perfectly motionless and dead: "...about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity – an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the grey wall, and the silent tarn – a pestilent and mystic vapour, and leaden - hued" (Poe, *TFHU* 179). Poe's narrative atmosphere approaches the definition given by the popular Cyclopaedia compiled by Abraham Rees; it is "a kind of sphere formed by the effluvia, or minute corpuscles emitted from them" (qtd. in Walker 49).The atmosphere has in the same time a material and moral effect over the space and its inhabitants. Roderick believes, for instance, that the "atmosphere" arising from the stagnated tarn and decay house is responsible not only for the strange characteristics of his family, but also for his own miserable existence:

Its- evidence of the sentience – was to be seen, he said (and here I started as he spoke); in the gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own about the waters and walls. The result was discoverable, he added, in that silent, yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family, and which made him what I now saw him. (Poe, *TFHU* 185).

On the night of the catastrophe, the "atmosphere" is particularly dense and wraps the entire house: "But the under surfaces of the huge masses of agitated vapour, as well as all terrestrial objects immediately surrounding us, were glowing in the unnatural light of a faintly luminous and distinctly visible laseous exhalation which hung about and enshrouded the mansion" (188). The air becomes dangerous like a poison and increases the character's mental torment. In this regard, Richard Wilbur sees *The Fall of the House of Usher* as "an allegorical journey into the depths of the self" (265). He says that it must be understood "as a dream of the narrator's, in which he leaves behind him the waking, physical world and journeys inward toward his 'moi intérireur', toward his inner and spiritual self" (Wilbur 265). Roderick Usher is that inner whereas the spiritual self is of the narrator, himself. The only way the narrator can reach this stage is that of reverie. However, reverie is, as Bachelard claims, "not a mind vacuum. It is rather the gift of an hour which knows the plenitude of the soul" (1994: 48). As the narrator enters the mansion, he must pass, just like the protagonist in *The Assignation,* through "many dark and intricate passages" in his progress to the master's

BDD-A27465 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:33 UTC)

studio. Symbolically, these passages can be seen as a labyrinth where the narrator loses his special orientation and falls into the state of reverie:

Much that I encountered on the way contributed, I know not how, to heighten the vague sentiments of which I have already spoken. While the objects around me--while the carvings of the ceilings, the sombre tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies which rattled as I strode, were but matters to which, or to such as which, I had been accustomed from my infancy--while I hesitated not to acknowledge how familiar was all this--I still wondered to find how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stirring up. (Poe, *TFHU* 179)

The valet, "of stealthy step", who conducts him through the passages, can be easily associated with Charon, as he opens him the door of another world of the shadows and ushers him to the master (Poe, *TFHU* 179) The room that he discovers has an irregular architecture and excessive interior décor. It is very large and lofty. The windows are long, narrow, and pointed, and at so vast a distance from the black oaken floor as to be altogether inaccessible from within. Feeble gleams of crimsoned light make their way through the trellised panes and render sufficiently distinct the more prominent objects around. The eye struggles to reach the remoter angles of the chamber, or the recesses of the vaulted and fretted ceiling. The immensity of the room is explained by Bachelard, through the fact that daydreamers allegedly contemplate grandeur and transport themselves to a world that bears the mark of infinity. Bachelard suggests that when we revere things, for example, a large forest full of tall impressive trees, we often exaggerate them in our minds to become immense and never ending. This exaggeration can be seen as an effort of making sense of the infinite nature of the universe. Although, in general, Poe's dreaming rooms are richly furnished and combine elements from different western and oriental cultures, here the idea of special and temporal freedom is conveyed in a different manner: "The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered. Many books and musical instruments lay scattered about, but failed to give any vitality to the scene. I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all" (Poe, *TFHU* 180).

Roderick Usher's library with all its rare and precious volumes from various historical contexts and counties, represents a concrete symbol of the timeless and spaceless of the dreaming mind. "The house that we experience is not an inert box; it transcends geometrical space – Bachelard says– and Poe's character, Roderick Usher "is far removed from any reference to simple geometrical forms" (Bachelard, 1969: 47). The extreme decay of the House of Usher can be seen as the decay of his state of mind. Living in the same house with Roderick, the visitor starts to identify himself with his host's mental state, dreaming of being freed from his physical body, and material world (Bachelard, 1969: 47). Roderick is in a sort of hypnagogic state. This is a condition of semiconsciousness in which the closed eye beholds a continuous procession of vivid and constantly changing forms. These forms sometimes have colour but they often abstract, strange. In his reflections, titled *Marginalia* (1845-1849), Poe claims that the hypnagogic sate is the visionary condition par excellence, and that its "rapidly shifting abstract images" are actually "glimpses of the spirit's outer world" (20). These visionary glimpses "arise in the soul...only at those mere points of time where the confines of the waking world blend with those of the world of dreams" and one can be aware of them "only upon the very brink of sleep, with the consciousness that [he is] so" (19). The visitor recognizes in Usher an inconsistent behaviour. He is in a state of altering excitement and depression: "His action was alternately vivacious and sullen" (Poe, *TFHU* 180). His music is distorted by a "morbid condition of the auditory nerve," and he plays a "certain singular perversion of and amplification of the wild air of the last walts of Von Weber" (180). Roderick certifies the break-up of his own mind, due to the presence of a strange painting:

BDD-A27465 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:33 UTC)

A small picture presented the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel, with low walls, smooth, white and without interruption or device.... No outlet was observed in any portion of its vast extent, and no torch, or other artificial source of light was discerniblel yet a flood of intense rays rolled throughout, and bathed the whole in aghastly and inappropriate splendour. (Poe, *TFHU* 183).

The music, the poem and the painting are shocking proves of Usher's emotional and intellectual derangement. More sounds create the effect of pulling space together, connecting the subterranean vault, from which the sounds come, with the upper floor, where the visitor and Roderick are at the time. In the *Poetics of Space*, Bachelard introduces the idea of "sound miniature", inviting us to hear the impossible sounds, of the poet's imagination by starting with Poe's auditory hallucinations (68). Roderick claims to hear Madeline's "first feeble movements" in the coffin and her steps on the stairs of the outside door (Poe, *TFHU* 190). In fact, he might be really able to hear them but this is due to his hypnagogic state and to the unusual bound he shares with his twin sister and with the house. Before Madelines's death, the narrator suggests that she was afflicted by "a settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although a transient affections of a partially cataleptical character . . ." (182). One evening, shortly after his arrived at the House of Usher, Roderick tells him that Madeline is dead and that he will preserve her corpse for a fortnight in a vault in the building rather than bury her in the remote family burial ground (quite a common practice back in those times). Thus, she is placed "at great depth, immediately beneath that portion of the building in which was [the narrator's] sleeping apartment" (186). The description of the burial place is made in great detail, leaving the impression that it is actually part of another time and world:

The vault "had been so long unopened that our torches, half smothered in its oppressive atmosphere gave us little opportunity for investigation) was small, damp, and entirely without means of admission for light.(...)It had been used, apparently, in remote feudal times, for the worst purposes of a donjon-keep, and, in later days, as a place of deposit for powder, or some other highly combustible substance, as a portion of its floor, and the whole interior of a long archway through which we reached it, were carefully sheathed with copper. The door, of massive iron, had been, also, similarly protected. Its immense weight caused an unusually sharp grating sound, as it moved upon its hinges. (186).

These details are important: the air in the vault which half smothers the torches, indicates a lack of sufficient oxygen; the floor of the vault and the passageway to it are copper covered-making it even more difficult for air to enter; the lid of the coffin is screwed down (Madeline's body is secured within the coffin); the door is huge and made of iron. In short, the body of the young woman is deposited in a place which, even if she is still alive, she cannot escape from. Still, Madeline reappears in the door opened by the storm, falls upon her brother and takes him to the world of dead. Even she seems to be real, she is only a hallucination, a ghost that seeks revenge. At this point, Poe's goal is not that of revealing Roderick's insane but also that of the visitor's. Although at the beginning of the tale he tries to oppose himself to the "atmosphere" of the Usher House: "I had so worked upon my imagination as really to believe that about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere which...had reeked up from the decay trees...," by the end of it, he gets contaminated by his friend (Poe, *TFHU* 179). He admits that he feels sinking in Roderick's black world by "slow yet certain degrees", to suffer from nightmares, and hear sounds (179). However, only one of these men dies, and it is definitely not be the one who tells the story. The visitor-narrator represents the "MADMAN," who sinks all the evidence, characters and setting, in a "deep and dark tarn at my feet" in order to continue to live a life of personhood in a material and tormenting world (Wilbur 267).

BDD-A27465 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:33 UTC)

The in depth analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's narrative space depicted in *The Assignation* and *The Fall of the House of Usher* helps us better understand the complex role of the setting in these texts as well as the mutual relation that exists between it and the characters particularly the protagonist narrator. We conclude that an important key in understanding Poe's system of thought and composition lies in the way in which he conceives his special representations, Gothic atmosphere, rich typology of symbols and, above all, the subtle use of the process of reverie and dreaming.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Reverie*. Trans. Maria Jola. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.

----------. *The Poetics of Space*. Trans. Maria Jola. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.

Berman Jacob Rama. "Domestic Terror and Poe's Arabesque Interior". *journals.library.ualberta*, 2007.

Bloom, Clive. *Reading Poe Reading Freud: The Romantic Imagination in Crisis*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988.

Carlson, Eric W. *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Criticism since 1829*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1970.

Harris, Laurie Lanzen. *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*. Gale Research Company, 1985.

Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Assignation ." *Complete Stories and Poems*, Ney York: Doubleday, 1966, pp. 139–147.

Poe, Edgar Allan. "*The Fall of the House of Usher*." *Complete Stories and Poems*, Ney York: Doubleday, 1966, pp. 177–190.

Poe, Edgar Allan. *Marginalia*. University Press of Virginia, 1981.

Souriau, Paul. *L'Imagination de l'artiste*. Paris: Alcan, 1986.

Wilbur, Richard. *Modern Critical Views on Edgar Allan Poe*. New York: Chealsea House Publishers, 1985.

BDD-A27465 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:33 UTC)